

## **ELSE MARIE HAGEN:**

### Imprints in soft material

A frontal view of a male torso, with the angled contours of an open book under the sky-blue T-shirt: *Imprints in soft material*. How did it end up there? What we in fact see and what lies beneath the surface are related in a fundamentally inconclusive way. The image hinders fixed solutions determined by visual curiosity. The hidden book, with its unknown author and title, indicates a secret literary pocket in time: stories to which you do not have direct access. The motif is sober and run-of-the-mill, not immediately something to write home about. Nevertheless it involves an impulse concealed in cloth.

I.

Else Marie Hagen has long operated with recognizable picture spaces, conceptually concentrated. References to a certain type of Nordic infrastructure – cool, sensible, with good intentions – alternating with scenes from the studio where the construction of the image is more explicit. Hagen is on home ground, in an equally analytical and impressionistic game communicating the inherent mechanisms of the image. Its function as a yardstick and standard is a recurrent feature, consistently forming meanings and conceptions of which we are not always aware.

In Hagen's works photography tends to point to its own complex nature, full of blind spots, assertions and pitfalls, degrees of fiction and reality; the production of the image revolves around its own conditions and possibilities. Imagined lines of sight project from the right angles of the surface, and into an immediate, more chaotically sensed world. Abstraction, the play of colours, objects against the skin. A line goes from the eyes (evaluating or seducing) to tactile and perceptual experiences.

II.

Hagen has earlier let her photographs function as small enigmatic actors within a standardized bureaucratic logic, with pointers to administrative and pedagogical factors and the formation of social and mental patterns. In the previous exhibition at Galleri K, *Index of behaviour*, the title pointed to a scheme for capturing deviations in behaviour among children and the young, meant for parents and supervisors. We were referred to the dry, paper-rustling world of the school system where norms are determined by averages. Here tables, sorting and categorization became a general backdrop for control and uniformity, challenged by individual pictorial elements. Youths themselves were to a great extent cut out of the background, a stylized form to be filled out.

Awareness of the way images deal with the learning of habits and patterns continues in these new pictures. In that sense the series of images becomes a sketchbook of something vaguely formative in unfinished processes. In parallel the child's tentative games become a housewarming for future family roles. Various materials are combined, often

loosely and temporarily: a formula is suggested in *Riddle*, where the hair of two girls is interwoven, in a temporary entanglement which in the long run will start to hurt. The long lines that cross one another and create concentration and focus also find an echo in several photographs with red threads which form a centre, in one of them supplemented by pointing hands. The camera lens focuses and blurs at will, and equates centre and margins. Basic form and colour constitute the raw materials manually and materially first and foremost as something workable.

In *Hand and material* there is an open, almost delicately narrow arm, with the hand stretched out towards moist clay in a cube, ready to assume its justification as form. Fully protected in a plastic foil the manual power lies unrealized in a loose, sprawling plane. The moment of creation has been unsentimentally put on hold, and what awaits it is sticky. But hygiene and purity have been preserved for the mute lump. At the opposite end of the scale it is demonstrated how practical arrangements can unconsciously produce a formal aesthetic and narrative. *Individual figures* shows two tender young trees protected by transparent plastic, like an enlarged version of the wrapping of the hand. A hovering impression of an intimate chat, an uncertain couple leaning against a chicken-wire fence on a summer's day.

The people themselves are often absent or relegated to the background as performers of small actions. The distinct and blurred still alternate, with no clear programme; a group of people by a naked tree at first seem to be almost invisible, totally over-exposed, then in full daylight (*Temporary grouping*). Back and front are parallel but inverted versions of each other.

III.

In different ways the paper ties the whole exhibition together – as a constant strand of meaning, but more specifically as a bearing photographic material. Hagen still ventures out into the photographic-sculptural, in open hybrids that spin three-dimensionally directly into the space. A cut-out personal silhouette bobs out. The destabilizing of the plane of the picture space is also something we find in *Portrait with watch*, where a man in a white shirt is cut into strips like a Venetian blind. The arm with the wristwatch hangs down like a misplaced tie.

Text fragments, apparently hurriedly written down, appear in the complex picture space as cursory and tendentious notes – with no defined context. It is unclear who they come from, and who they are meant for. This makes the interpretation entirely fluid. *Readers' choice* shows long pegs resting against the wall. Fastened to these are scraps of paper with short handwritten descriptions and statements, like stage directions. The written indications provide rough outlines: he in the ocean, she in the bed. The narrative is hidden in the sleeve, and clashes with something absurd and random. The underlying semantics and informative function of the text assert a right to meaning in a different way from the images. The wrapping and the content interweave in a restless power play; in one photograph you see stacked parcels in grey paper with inscriptions; together they write out "What will you give me in return?". The transactions between the internal and external messages of the image, its potential gift and counterclaim, hold open a cycle of possible interpretations.

IV.

*A couple of hundred years* is the title of two related works. One has a jumble of four-digit numbers in long, sloping rows. Viewed as years they range wide historically; without visible linear logic they point both back and forward in time: 1891, 2022, 2048, 1905 etc. You assume the title indicates the total period. Messy hatchings lie beneath this loose grid of figures, formed as a kind of blackboard. In the other image we are also in a kind of rigged-up studio where similar strips of figures are laid over a chair. The friction between the mechanical – our metric way of dividing up existence, with scales and numbering – and the real experience of a dark, inconsistent abyss, immediately appears. A constant calibration and staging of categories is investigated in Else Marie Hagen's photographs, where time and utterances are always temporary arrangements. Or imprints in soft material.

Line Ulekleiv

Translated by James Manley